



**Maximizing the Achievement
of African American Children
in Kanawha (MAACK):**

**Assessing Laboratory
Support of a Community
Initiative**

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December 2005

Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL)
at

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Maximizing the Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha (MAACK): Assessing Laboratory Support of a Community Initiative

Introduction

Achievement gaps—that is, differences in academic achievement among ethnic and socioeconomic groups—have long been an issue of concern in education. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) began, upon its institution in 2002, to hold states more directly accountable for the progress of all students, including students of color and students of low socioeconomic status (SES). These groups of students have historically performed less well than their White or upper-class peers.

In 2001, prior to the passage of NCLB, officials from Kanawha County Schools (KCS) and local community members began addressing educational inequities for African American students. The West Virginia school district had been the focus of several negative media reports and had been under scrutiny for ethnicity-related issues including the social promotion of African American students and inadequate performance on state assessments at schools serving high percentages of African American students. The district had not been successful in its attempts to help African American students make gains in achievement test and ACT scores, college preparedness, or high school graduation rates. Further, KCS had received a citation from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights because of the disproportional representation of African American students in certain special education categories. These factors prompted KCS officials to see a need to reach out to local African American community leaders and take steps to address the needs of African American students served by the district.

In May of 2001, KCS officials approached Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL) at Edvantia, Inc. (hereafter, “the lab” or “laboratory”) staff members and requested assistance in establishing a dialogue with African American community leaders about the needs and achievement of African American children in the district. The lab, which had begun a partnership with faith-based organizations in the local community to expand educational support for African American and low-income youth (see Keyes & Kusimo, 2004, for more information), agreed to facilitate the process. As a result, the school district and community leaders began a 16-month dialogue and collaboration that focused on race and education. The primary function of the initiative was to increase understanding of the educational experiences and perceptions of African American students and of school district personnel and thereby improve the quality of education for African American students in the district. The community members of the initiative adopted the name Maximizing the Achievement of African American Children in Kanawha (MAACK). Although the formal dialogue process ended in 2002, the MAACK Community Initiative continues to function and to collaborate with KCS to find ways to decrease achievement gaps between African American students and their White peers.

Community leaders from the MAACK work to mobilize the broader community to take action and become involved in efforts to improve the academic achievement of African American and low-income students. Since the initiative’s inception, Edvantia has supported the initiative through assistance with record keeping, mailings, printing, and copying. Edvantia

staff also have provided technological support for the initiative's Web site (www.maacknews.org), funded part-time community coordinators, and helped the group plan and publicize its activities. Edvantia staff undertook these support activities to help the initiative (1) increase communication and cooperation between the schools that serve African American and low-income students and their communities, and (2) increase community members' efforts to support, advocate for, and monitor the quality of education.

During the fall of 2005, evaluation data were collected and analyzed to determine the nature of Edvantia's lab-supported involvement, and to examine the extent to which delivered services were useful for the MAACK Community Initiative. A primary audience for this report is project staff, who served as the key facilitators.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this evaluation were selected purposefully. They were laboratory staff members who were involved in MAACK activities, and they were educators and/or community members who served in leadership roles in the MAACK. Ultimately, two staff members, one consultant, one school district administrator, and three community members (including two co-chairs of the MAACK initiative) participated in this study.

With the exception of one laboratory staff member who began working with the MAACK in 2004, all participants had been active in the MAACK project for at least three years, and four of the participants had been MAACK members since its inception. In addition to representing long-term experience with the MAACK, the sample was also racially diverse: three participants were White, and four were African American.

Design and Data Collection

The intent of this study was to describe the perceptions and experiences of a particular group (MAACK Community Initiative leaders and participants). A qualitative research paradigm was selected for this study because it was largely an investigation of a social phenomenon, undertaken by intensively comparing, contrasting, and classifying participants' experiences, and perceptions (Yin, 2003).

The research strategy developed for this study involved a series of in-depth interviews with MAACK community members, the school administrator, and Edvantia staff and consultant who worked with the MAACK. This qualitative methodology corresponded to the nature of the data sought: attitudes, self-reported behavior, and exploration of interactions and exchanges (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Yin, 2003). The evaluator (an external consultant) developed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A for protocol and Appendix B for consent information), and all interviews were conducted in person at Edvantia's offices in

Charleston, West Virginia, during late October 2005. Interviews were recorded on audiotape, and the recordings and evaluator's notes served as the data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded and summarized according to general descriptive categories. Pattern coding (Fetterman, 1989; Yin, 2003) was used to discover patterns among individuals and descriptive categories. Before making any assertions regarding a pattern, the evaluator conducted a search for data that opposed or were inconsistent with these conclusions. The portrait of the interviewees' experiences is derived from this work.

Findings

The results of the interviews are presented here. The following section describes the role of the regional educational laboratory at Edvantia in the MAACK Community Initiative, leadership in school-community relationships, and efforts to facilitate community collaboration and mobilization.

Role in the MAACK Community Initiative

Laboratory staff members who were active with the MAACK were perceived by all non-staff interviewees as providers of support, facilitators, organizers, brainstormers, and, most significantly, leaders. Interestingly, none of the Edvantia staff perceived themselves as leaders in the MAACK. In particular, one explained, "We are here to provide support and research. The MAACK is led by community members and their cochaIRS."

School-Community Relationships Leadership

Laboratory staff members were to provide support and facilitation for school-community forums in which KCS officials and African American community members in Kanawha County learned how to identify, discuss, and address issues affecting the education of African American and low-SES students. What follows is a description of how the lab staff and key MAACK members carried out these goals.

Every Thursday, the MAACK Community Initiative met at a church in an African American neighborhood. According to the KCS and community participants, the laboratory staff emerged as the leaders of these meetings, despite the presence of MAACK committee cochaIRS. This perception is based on the lab's role in organizing the meetings, which included such activities as arranging for a meeting space, distributing information about when and where the meetings would occur, setting the agenda for the meetings, and facilitating the discussion at the meetings.

Interviews revealed that laboratory staff carried out the following activities related to leadership in school-community relationships:

- Laboratory staff facilitated learning and discussion about issues affecting the education of African American and low-SES students. For example, one interviewee (a school official) reported that there was significant tension between the African American community members present at the meetings and the educators; in an attempt to break down the barriers between the two groups, lab staff members engaged the MAACK in role-playing activities. According to the school official, “As a result of activities like this, the community was able to get beyond ‘us-versus-them’ thinking and begin to discuss problems affecting African American students and solutions to those problems.”
- Laboratory staff worked with the community to interpret and disseminate information about district graduation rates, test results, and course enrollment patterns disaggregated by ethnicity and SES. All of the MAACK members interviewed for this study suggested that sharing data about African American students was one of the most important aspects of the lab’s role in the MAACK and may have been *the* most important. One MAACK member explained that “sharing achievement data with educators, counselors, and community members helped to solidify the [reality of] problems with the achievement gap in KCS. While it was emotionally difficult for everyone to see the data, we all recognized how profound the problem is: We are not educating our Black kids.”
- Laboratory staff worked with school leaders and African American community representatives in Kanawha County. According to interviewees—laboratory staff members, in particular—occasionally, the MAACK invited schoolteachers, counselors, principals, and local ministers from predominantly Black churches to MAACK meetings. These meetings seemed to garner the largest attendance of African American community members because, as one MAACK member explained, “They provided a venue for parents to ask questions about the schools, a place where all of the community members could get honest feedback. The result was that communication between the schools and parents increased, and church leaders began to promote the MAACK at their churches.” In addition to generating discussion within a broader community, laboratory staff also taught the community leaders how to read data and also trained some community leaders in how to use a variety of reading tools intended to help the community close the achievement gap.

Although these activities, together, seemed to engage the schools and the African American community in a meaningful dialogue, the MAACK members reported significant challenges in carrying out these tasks. One member thought that collecting and disseminating the data (in a timely manner) were difficult tasks, but well worth the effort. Additionally, three members thought that facilitating discussion around the data was taxing because the community’s response was emotionally charged. However, the biggest challenge, according to all interviewees, was “getting the parents to come to the meetings.” One member explained that she would transport some parents herself from time to time; nevertheless, attendance at the meetings waxed and waned. For instance, at one meeting there were at least 100 people present, but most often there were fewer than 20.

Role in Collaboration and Mobilization

As mentioned previously, laboratory staff planned to collaborate with African American community leaders and others in Kanawha County to develop materials and strategies useful in community mobilization efforts to close the achievement gap. However, although most of the interviewees believed there was some collaboration, few could point to specific examples of such activities. Ultimately, the collaboration was perceived to focus on the following activities:

- Laboratory staff developed online and print materials to inform community members about issues affecting and resources supporting student learning, gathered research materials around academic achievement, and, with the help of the MAACK steering committee, produced brochures for parents. These materials focused on three school levels: elementary school, middle school, and high school. The brochures provided information about what students should be doing/learning at different grade levels. Staff also helped the MAACK develop a Web site that provided similar but more extensive information.
- Laboratory staff worked with the school district to train community academic advisors. As mentioned earlier, staff also helped train community members to serve as community academic advisors. These academic advisors helped answer questions and provided guidance to both teachers and parents of African American students.
- As part of a separate but related project, laboratory staff helped the schools develop culturally sensitive curriculum materials and trained educators to implement them in the schools (described in Hughes et al., 2004). According to one MAACK member, “They not only helped us create it, but they also followed through and carried out observations as we implemented it in our classrooms. This collaboration was indispensable.”

While the MAACK members were proud of their collaboration with the laboratory, they recognized that there were some daunting challenges in such a venture. Specifically, one member expressed disappointment with the MAACK’s attempt to engage the African American ministers in the project. She felt that “early on, the ministers all showed up to the meetings and implied that they would be willing to collaborate with the MAACK. Unfortunately, as time went by, fewer and fewer ministers participated.” In addition, one laboratory staff member perceived tension related to the lab’s role: “... staff ... had to decide whether we were advocates or support. If we were advocates, we could actively engage in collaborations with community members to help close the achievement gap, but if we were support, our ability to collaborate was limited in that regard. In the end, I think we leaned more toward support, which meant that our role was simply to provide structure to the organization.”

Finally, two of the three MAACK members who were interviewed felt that the collaboration was missing one key element: capacity building. Interviewees explained that the lab provided outstanding leadership and guidance; however, it did not help the MAACK develop a strategy for continuing the work of the organization without lab support. As one

member explained, “We will continue this work, but we don’t know how. We don’t really know what we need [in terms of resources] to carry on.”

Conclusions and Discussion

The data presented here paint a complex picture of the laboratory’s role in the MAACK community initiative. However, some conclusions based on the data can be stated clearly:

- Laboratory staff provided necessary structure and organization to MAACK meetings and activities.
- Laboratory staff gathered and disseminated educational achievement data and other relevant school data.
- Laboratory staff facilitated challenging and emotionally charged discussions between community members and school district personnel regarding the achievement gap.
- Laboratory staff collaborated with MAACK members to produce relevant print documents and online materials to educate and engage African American parents and students, but most people interviewed could not describe particular instances of collaboration.

The involvement and support of lab staff with the MAACK Community Initiative seemed to include activities that could advance the goals of (1) increasing communication and cooperation between the schools that serve African American and low-income students and their communities, and (2) increasing community members’ efforts to support, advocate for, and monitor the quality of education. However, a few points are worth further consideration.

Although the laboratory staff involved with the MAACK project did not perceive themselves as leaders of the community initiative, all of the non-staff interviewees did hold that perception. In fact, most of them believed that the lab’s leadership was the key factor in mobilizing the meetings and carrying out various activities. Consequently, the MAACK members expressed anxiety about the future of the MAACK without continuing guidance and support from the lab. Perhaps these perceptions contributed to the MAACK members’ thoughts on collaboration. They seem to have sensed that laboratory staff were more like leaders than collaborators in the MAACK activities.

The inconsistency between the perceptions of MAACK community members and laboratory staff regarding leadership of the initiative is interesting. Staff members thought they communicated to community members that the MAACK belonged to the community and that the lab was to provide support only. However, as evidenced by the differences in perceptions and by the anxiety of community members about the laboratory’s imminent withdrawal from involvement, the community members may not have understood fully or accurately the distinction between support and leadership. Likewise, staff may not have understood the positions or perceptions of community members. The perception among community members that laboratory staff were leaders in the initiative could be due to the structural support

provided by the lab. The community members may have associated such support with leadership, regardless of the actions of staff members or any statements to the contrary. Further, the facilitation of meetings by lab staff may have been perceived as leadership. If lab staff were not conscious of community members' perceptions, they would not have recognized the need to taken action to further empower community members to take over facilitation responsibilities. This lack of awareness on the part of laboratory staff is evident in the perceptual differences.

In the present, it may be important for staff to work with MAACK Community Initiative leaders to develop an exit strategy and to help build capacity within the initiative to ensure that the work will continue without continuing laboratory support and guidance. In future efforts of this nature, it may be important to develop such an exit strategy at the outset of the collaboration. Further, processes should be instituted to ensure that staff are aware of the perceptions and beliefs of group members and to ensure that group members and laboratory staff have shared understandings of definitions, roles, and responsibilities. Explicit steps to ensure capacity building and empowerment of the community group or initiative throughout the partnership should also be planned and instituted at the outset. Such strategies may include encouraging tangible, in-kind contributions from group members (e.g., membership dues, contributions of supplies). These contributions may foster the perception among community members that they "own" the group and are equally invested in its success.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Protocol for Evaluation Interviews

MAACK Project Interview Protocol

The goal of this protocol is to gather information from community members, school district officials, and Edvantia staff members who were involved in the MAACK project in an effort to describe their role in MAACK project activities and implementation. Thus, the questions are driven by the MAACK project objectives: (1) to increase communication and cooperation between the schools that serve African American and low-income students and their communities; and (2) to increase community members' efforts to support, advocate for, and monitor the quality of education.

Interview Questions

Leadership in school-community relationships

Edvantia/AEL was to provide leadership in school-community forums in which staff of Kanawha County (WV) Schools and African American community members in Kanawha County learned how to identify, discuss, and address issues impacting the education of African American and low-SES students. Did this occur as planned?

1. Who were the AEL staff members selected to provide that leadership, and what were their roles?
2. What was your role in the leadership of the school-community forums (if any)?
3. What were the major leadership activities that you carried out (or those carried out by the Edvantia/AEL staff) related to the school-community forums?

Probe:

- a. (How) did they/you facilitate learning and discussion about issues impacting the education of African American and low-SES students?
 - b. (How) did they/you work with the community to interpret and disseminate information about district graduation rates, test results, and course enrollment patterns disaggregated by ethnicity and SES?
 - c. (How) did they/you work with school leaders and African American community representatives in Kanawha County, WV, to convene school and community leaders?
 - d. (How) did they/you disseminate research on the achievement gap and best practices for improving minority student achievement with community, school leadership and teachers?
4. How often and where did the forums convene?

5. What were some of the challenges/benefits associated with the leadership of the forums?

Probe:

- a. (How) did you/they overcome those challenges?

Collaboration and mobilization

Edvantia/AEL planned to collaborate with African American community leaders and others in Kanawha County, West Virginia, to develop materials and strategies useful in community mobilization efforts to close the achievement gap. Did this occur?

1. Who were the Edvantia/AEL staff members that collaborated with the African-American community leaders?
2. What did you/the Edvantia/AEL members do to facilitate the collaboration?

Probe:

- a. Develop online and print materials to inform community members about issues affecting and resources supporting student learning.
 - b. Work with school district to train community academic advisors.
 - c. Provide staff support for community leaders as they plan efforts to mobilize community members to address the achievement gap issue.
 - d. Work with community members and leaders to implement community mobilization plans.
3. What were some of the challenges/benefits associated with the collaboration efforts?

Probe:

- a. (How) did you/they overcome those challenges?
4. Were there any MAACK project activities, other than those originally planned for Edvantia/AEL staff members, that you participated in? If so please describe them.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Information for Evaluation Interviews



**MAACK Community Initiative (School-
Community Connections)
*Evaluation Interviews***

Contacts:

Georgia Hughes, Research & Evaluation Specialist I (304-347-0413; georgia.hughes@edvantia.org)

Edvantia, Inc. (formerly AEL) in Charleston has collaborated with the MAACK Community Initiative to support and facilitate the group's activities and provide guidance as needed. The company is now evaluating its efforts to determine whether or not the support provided was useful or beneficial to the MAACK. As part of the evaluation, we are conducting interviews with knowledgeable people such as yourself to find out more about Edvantia's work.

We are asking that you give us your honest feedback and opinions about various aspects of Edvantia's support of the MAACK. The interview should require about 30 minutes of your time. Participating in this interview should involve no risks to you that are any greater than those you experience in your daily life. Your participation in this survey is voluntary; you may discontinue your involvement at any time without any reprisal or penalty.

Edvantia staff will take every reasonable precaution to protect your confidentiality throughout this project¹. The information that you provide will be combined with information from other interviewees and reported all together. Your individual responses will not be singled out and you will never be identified by name or role in any report(s). Only your interviewer (Aaron Baker) and Georgia Hughes will have access to your responses.

Taking part in this interview will allow you to provide important and useful feedback to Edvantia, which will use the results of this research to inform future efforts with similar initiatives. Although you will not be compensated directly for your participation, your thoughts and suggestions will help Edvantia make important decisions about how they can best serve the needs of educators and community members.

Your participation in the interview indicates your consent. If you have any questions or concerns about this interview, including its purpose or expectations of you as a participant, please contact Georgia Hughes (304-347-0413 or georgia.hughes@edvantia.org). If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact Dr. Merrill Meehan, Edvantia's Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair (304-347-0432 or merrill.meehan@edvantia.org).

¹ Data collected for research purposes are stored in compliance with ISO 17799 requirements for access, security, and redundancy. Data are stored in an encrypted format in a centralized, electronically and physically secure server at Edvantia for a period not to exceed five years. All electronic data of a personal nature are safeguarded and available only to those project leaders, staff, and technologists having a need to know within the specific criteria as set forth in the approved project plan. The Edvantia Institutional Review Board (IRB) has the authority to inspect consent records and data files only to assure compliance with approved procedures.

Appendix C

Evaluation Standards Checklist

Checklist for Applying the Program Evaluation Standards

To interpret the information provided on this form, the reader needs to refer to the full text of the standards as they appear in Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, *The Program Evaluation Standards* (1994), Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

The Standards were consulted and used as indicated in the table below (check as appropriate):

Standard & Descriptor	The Standard was addressed	The Standard was partially addressed	The Standard was not addressed	The Standard was not applicable
U1 Stakeholder Identification	✓			
U2 Evaluation Credibility	✓			
U3 Information Scope and Selection	✓			
U4 Values Identification	✓			
U5 Report Clarity	✓			
U6 Report Timeliness and Dissemination	✓			
U7 Evaluation Impact	✓			
F1 Practical Procedures	✓			
F2 Political Viability	✓			
F3 Cost Effectiveness	✓			
P1 Service Orientation	✓			
P2 Formal Agreements	✓			
P3 Rights of Human Subjects	✓			
P4 Human Interactions	✓			
P5 Complete and Fair Assessment	✓			
P6 Disclosure of Findings	✓			
P7 Conflict of Interest	✓ Consultant hired to conduct evaluation			
P8 Fiscal Responsibility	✓			
A1 Program Documentation		✓		
A2 Context Analysis		✓		
A3 Described Purposes and Procedures	✓			
A4 Defensible Information Sources	✓			
A5 Valid Information	✓			
A6 Reliable Information	✓			
A7 Systematic Information	✓			
A8 Analysis of Quantitative Information				✓
A9 Analysis of Qualitative Information	✓			
A10 Justified Conclusions	✓			
A11 Impartial Reporting	✓			
A12 Metaevaluation				✓ May be metaevaluated at a later time

The Program Evaluation Standards (1994, Sage) guided the development of this (check one):

- ☐ Request for evaluation plan/design/proposal
 ☒ Evaluation report
☐ Evaluation plan/design/proposal
 ☐ Other: _____
☐ Evaluation contract

Name: Georgia K. Hughes
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